

Obviously '60s Revisited Again

Bob Dylan: *The Witmark Demos 1962-1964, The Bootleg Series Vol.9; The Original Mono Recordings* (Columbia Records)

by Peter Stone Brown

Way back in the early 1960s, my brother and I would buy Bob Dylan songbooks. They would usually, though not always follow an album's release and be titled after the album title. These songbooks didn't always include all the songs that were on a specific album, and quite often they'd have another song or two, usually something we'd never heard. Both of us probably could have sat down at the piano, read the music and figured them out, but that was too much like school and music was our escape from that. Some of these songs appeared on records by other singers. Dave Van Ronk, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Pete Seeger were probably the first to record unreleased Dylan songs, followed pretty quickly by Ian & Sylvia, Judy Collins and others. Then in 1964 (though the album may have not been released until early in '65), a singer named Hamilton Camp recorded a several previously unrecorded Dylan songs on an album named *Paths Of Victory*. All we knew at the time about Hamilton Camp, who like Dylan played guitar and harmonica simultaneously, was that he was previously known as Bob Camp and had recorded an album with folksinger Bob Gibson. Later on we found out Camp was also a (usually comic) actor, and pretty good too. Two songs from that album (not the Dylan songs) would get big time radio play a few years later. "Get Together" was a huge hit for the Youngbloods, and Camp's own "Pride of Man" would become an FM rock radio favorite in a version done by Quicksilver Messenger Service. Not long after Camp's album, Odetta released *Odetta Sings Dylan*, which had a couple more of these previously unheard songs.

When it was announced a couple of months ago that the ninth volume of *The Bootleg Series* would be *The Witmark Demos*, the groans of never satisfied Bob Dylan fans emanated on various online Dylan discussion forums. A couple of the songs had already been released on the first volume of *The Bootleg Series*, and many had had the bootlegged versions for years. But what the *Witmark Demos* (which also includes demos from Dylan's first publisher, Leeds Music) does is put all these songs together in one place for the first time on a legitimate release.

The reason for these demos is simple. Most songwriters working in folk, rock 'n' roll, country and western, and blues, when they write a song, they don't write it in musical notation. They write the lyrics and

the guitar chords. Back then in order to get a song copyrighted, you had to send in a musical composition. Songwriters would go their publishers, sing into a tape recorder, and someone would then transcribe so it could be copyrighted and be published. (Sometime in the 1980s, the Library of Congress changed this so you could simply send in a recording with your application.) The songbooks that appeared would have the melody and guitar chords, but quite often the chords though they worked, were not what Dylan was actually playing. The demos were also used to send the songs to other singers for consideration.

Much like the DVD of Dylan's Newport Folk Festival performances, *The Other Side Of The Mirror* released a few years ago, *The Witmark Demos* shows Dylan's incredible growth as an artist in a three year period. And make no mistake; these are demos, rough in performance, rough in sound quality. Dylan often stops mid-song, makes corrections to the lyrics, some songs are unfinished. On a couple of tracks, I hear a sound that sounds like the sound of tape rubbing against a plastic tape reel.

Many of the songs reveal Woody Guthrie's influence, perhaps more than the songs that made it onto Dylan's album, not only lyrically but in spirit. The flashes of Dylan's poetic genius surface early, usually on the songs that made it to albums, such as "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." Dylan's other great influence, the blues is also quite in evidence, and the songs find him toying with various blues forms, sometimes extending into ragtime and jazz. Dave Van Ronk recorded one of these songs, "All Over You" with the Red Onion Jazz Band. It may have been the first Dylan cover recorded.

What makes many of these tracks interesting is that Dylan often sings with the conviction and intensity he showed in concert and in the recording studio. Sometimes you hear him being drawn in as a song progresses, and without really trying many of these tracks end up as performances even though they didn't have to be.

The album starts with the incomplete "Man On The Street," listed as fragment, which Dave Van Ronk would eventually record on his *No Dirty Names* album as "The Old Man." The melody is from an old folk song, "The Young Man Who Wouldn't Hoe Corn," I first heard Pete Seeger sing on a 10-inch Folkways album of work songs called *This Land Is My Land* that featured a bunch of singers including Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston. To this day, I'm not sure how "This Land Is Your Land" qualifies as a work song. In typical Folkways style, "Young Man" was listed on the cover as "Farming Song," though the real title was on the actual label. Dylan's penchant for borrowing

melodies from other folk songs (also Woody Guthrie's favorite trick) is quite apparent, though by the time he reaches the later songs on this two-disc set, that starts to change as he moves further from not only Guthrie influenced lyrics, but from songs written to sound as well as seem like old folk songs.

The Witmark Demos is not a release for a new Dylan fan, or to turn someone onto Dylan. Many of the songs appear in superior versions on his albums. However for those interested, what makes these versions worthwhile are the occasional lyric and guitar variations as well as a glimpse into his songwriting process in its earliest stages. Dylan's power, charm and humor are much in evidence despite recording in what was probably the most un-inspirational setting possible. The package comes with a particularly well done booklet, with photocopies of early lyrics, copyright forms, the demos themselves and truly excellent liner notes by Colin Escott.

Up until some point in 1967 when the record industry announced it only going to manufacture stereo recordings, every album I owned was a mono record. In the '50s and '60s record stores that had the room to do so, had separate sections for mono and stereo. On major labels, mono records cost three bucks, and stereo four bucks. Smaller labels such as Vanguard and Elektra cost a dollar more. You could play a mono record on a stereo player, but you couldn't play a stereo album on a mono player. In 1963, my family moved from Philly to a town in Northern New Jersey. My brothers and I were all sent to different camps for the summer while the move took place. When we returned home, my step-brother presented my brother and I with albums for our birthdays which had happened over the summer. The albums were *We Shall Overcome* by Pete Seeger for me and *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* for my brother. Unfortunately they were in stereo, so we took them to the local record store to exchange them. The Dylan album was an easy exchange, but the Seeger album, even though it was on the same label, even though it was a pretty big album at the time, never came in. This little weekly drama went on for four months, until one day early in January I walked in and there was *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Immediately I asked the owner, can I have this instead? Years later when I started working in record stores and discovered it didn't take four months for records (especially on a major label like Columbia) to come in, I realized the owner of that store was a prick and never ordered the album.

Except for the fact that stereo existed, there was really no good reason to record a solo singer with a guitar in stereo, but Columbia and every other label did. Phil Spector, whose elaborate productions were way more than a singer and guitar thought there was no reason

to record in stereo period. In Dylan's case, on his solo recordings, the voice would be in the middle, the guitar would dominate on one side with a little on the other and every once in a while a harp solo would appear in one speaker. When Dylan started recording with other musicians, there were vast differences in the mono and stereo versions, particularly on *Highway 61 Revisited* and most noticeably on *Blonde On Blonde*.

The Original Mono Recordings takes Dylan's first eight albums from *Bob Dylan* through *John Wesley Harding* and presents them in their original mono form, with replications of the original covers, including the slip cases. Included is a booklet with notes by Greil Marcus, the original release dates and when the recordings took place.

For those interested in sound and sound quality, or as in my case after more than 40 years, the original vinyl mono copies are a bit beat up, these are the versions of these Dylan albums to own. As good as the remasters issued in the early 2,000s were, there's something about the sound on these discs that finally seems right. According to the liner notes, these are the versions that Dylan himself preferred. Considering Dylan's numerous comments on digital recording I have no doubt this is true. All of this makes sense except that Dylan's live concerts are mixed in stereo.

My own experience with the differences in stereo and mono on these albums came when I was staying at someone's house, and noticed the stereo fadeouts on *Highway 61 Revisited* were longer. This particular copy of that album also had a "From A Buick Six" that was not the one on my record at home, which is a whole other story. My next experience was hearing "One Of Us Must Know" from *Blonde On Blonde* and hearing an organ solo that wasn't on the mono version. Okay, so some reading this may say, wait a minute, stuff you couldn't hear, longer fadeouts, what's wrong with that? Well, as a whole it doesn't mean better sound-wise.

There are numerous other differences between the mono and stereo versions, and again in the case of *Blonde On Blonde* often between individual copies as well as various versions in different countries. All of these differences in sound and mixes are noted in astonishing detail by a fellow from England named Roger Ford on his website Electric Dylan.

<http://www.rdf.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/>

Ford has collected copies of *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde On Blonde* from all over the world, and has

analyzed them right down the matrix number on the vinyl recordings. The matrix number appears on the actual vinyl disc itself, scrawled into the vinyl between the final track and the label. The matrix number includes a key to when and where the album was pressed. On *Blonde On Blonde* a two-disc set, both discs did not necessarily come from the same pressing plant. And amazing as it seems, not every pressing plant pressed discs the same exact way.

When this set was announced, the Dylan fans who knew about this stuff waited to see if the mixes were actually the original mono mixes or something else. The organ solo, the longer fades, an obvious mistake by Robbie Robertson on "Visions Of Johanna," and a barely audible laugh by Dylan only on the mono version at the very end of "Desolation Row" were the key tests as to whether these were the true mono mixes. The box set has passed all.

Now this is not to say that the stereo versions don't have their own merits. They do. For instance "Fourth Time Around," where Dylan's rhythm guitar is very audible. While hearing that guitar puts another spin on things, having had the mono version basically ingrained in my mind for decades, there's something disconcerting about hearing it. It's not supposed to be a dominant part of the song, but on the stereo mix it is. At the same time, if there is one album that I would like to hear the original unmixed tracks, just to see what else may be there, it's *Blonde On Blonde*. There are a lot of guitars on that record and a lot of great guitarists, and one of the cool things about it was on the first several listens, you would hear something you didn't hear before.

The album I was most interested to hear in mono was *John Wesley Harding*, the first Dylan album I bought in stereo. For some reason this album never transferred well to CD, not even on the remastered version where Dylan's harp playing came off way too shrill. I was also concerned if Charlie McCoy's great bass parts as well as Kenny Buttrey's drums would have the same clarity as on the stereo vinyl. The mono mix captured all as well as the feel of that album's very singular sound makes this easily the best version of this album available on CD.

What you get on *Bringing It All Back Home* through *John Wesley Harding* is not only a much warmer sound, but the blend of the entire band heard as a cohesive whole.

The only time *The Mono Recordings* messes up is when it comes to the statistics at the end of booklet. While all the albums are presented in their original form in their original covers, the booklet has a track by track listing that simply isn't right. Dylan fans who

care about who is playing what have argued about this stuff for years, and all this is going to do is start the arguments anew. On *Bringing It All Back Home*, originally none of the studio musicians were credited period, and with the exception of guitarist Bruce Langhorne who appeared with Dylan before the album's release on the *Les Crane Show* on TV, and also has a very identifiable sound, it was years before anyone found out who the rest of the musicians were. On *Highway 61 Revisited*, the musicians and what they played were credited, but not a track by track listing. To be fair back then, studio musicians were rarely credited on albums, and track by track listings even rarer. On *Blonde On Blonde*, the musicians from the Nashville sessions were listed, but not what they played. One track, "One Of Us Must Know," was recorded prior to the Nashville sessions in New York, and included the two musicians who also took part in the Nashville sessions, Robbie Robertson and Al Kooper. In Sean Wilentz' recent book he credits (I believe correctly) the remaining musicians on that track as Paul Griffin, piano, Rick Danko, bass, and Bobby Gregg on drums.

The musician credits in the booklet confuse things totally. Charlie McCoy, who plays the great second guitar on "Desolation Row" isn't mentioned for that track at all. Robbie Robertson isn't listed for "Visions of Johanna," something I personally asked Al Kooper who plays organ on the track about several years ago. Then perhaps most baffling of all, there's a piano listed for "It's All Over Now Baby Blue." It ain't there, never was there.

Then there's the little problem of release dates. For some reason Columbia keeps listing the release date of *Blonde On Blonde* first on his official website and now in this book as being May 16, 1966. My suspicion is that was the originally scheduled release date, but if release date means when the album was in the stores, it wasn't. In the spring of '66 it was well known that Dylan had recorded a new album in Nashville. There were quite a few singles before its release. The last of those singles prior to the album was "I Want You." That single had a special surprise on the flip side, a live recording of "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," recorded in Liverpool on May 14th. This was the first live Dylan track to appear on Columbia records. At that time, the only other live Dylan available were from the Newport Folk Festival in 1963 on Vanguard Records, and "Only A Pawn In Their Game" 1963 March On Washington For Jobs and Freedom on Folkways. I blasted that single at top volume on my mono record player several times a day waiting for *Blonde On Blonde* to come out. Another source for info on Dylan and other musicians was a weekly folk radio show I listened to every Sunday on the Princeton University station, WPRB by a guy named Jon Taplin. When Jon Taplin wasn't

being a Princeton student, he worked for Dylan's manager Albert Grossman, who also managed several other folk acts. Taplin was the road manager for the Jim Kweskin Jug Band. A few years later he would be the road manager for The Band. Besides from playing great music, Taplin's between song commentary would include all kinds of fun inside info. I spent a lot of time hanging out in one of record stores in my town where the owner would let me read *Billboard* and *Cashbox*. *Blonde On Blonde* finally hit the stores at the end of June. I finally held in my hands in a record store in Times Square. I was on my way to summer camp to be a counselor-in-training. The album was to be my birthday present a few days later, so I held in my hands for several agonizing moments and left for camp.

Also perplexing is the December 1967 release date for *John Wesley Harding*. This was Dylan's first post motorcycle accident album. Since that time there's been way longer waits time-wise between Dylan albums, but emotionally that was the longest wait because of the accident. Unlike today, once the accident was announced on the radio and with was a two-inch article buried in the middle of the *New York Times*, saying that a concert at the Yale Bowl had been cancelled, you heard nothing. Today there would be horses of media camped out in Woodstock waiting for a glimpse, but things weren't quite so insane back then. The following spring a reporter for the *New York Daily News* tracked him down in Woodstock, and then nothing again until a small article in the *Times* saying Columbia had suspended his contract, and then an announcement he was finally recording in Nashville. In addition, new records are rarely released between Thanksgiving and Christmas. *John Wesley Harding* was actually in the stores immediately following January 1, 1968.

The booklet lists all the singles Dylan released during the time period of these eight albums. Between *Highway 61* and *Blonde On Blonde*, Dylan released more singles than any time before or since. Two of those singles, "Positively 4th Street" and "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window," are not on any of the albums, though the former is available as a download if you buy the set. According to the booklet, "Crawl Out Your Window" being released and recalled before "4th Street." One day in September 1965, when "Positively 4th Street" was a hit and getting lots of Top 40 radio play, a friend calls me and quickly says, "They just announced "Positively 4th Street," but it's a different song, and puts the phone to his radio so I can hear it. The song I heard was "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window." A couple of months later the song was released, but I knew it wasn't the version I heard over the phone. About four or five years later, I finally heard that version again when I bought a bootleg called *Stealin'*.

Those quibbles aside, *The Mono Recordings* is a very good reason to revisit Dylan's most productive and prolific period of work.